

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

October 9, 2011

APOSTASY, HERESY, AND SCHISM

Toward the end of last week's sermon, we noted Jeremy Taylor's plea for toleration in the embittered times in which he lived. Now tolerance is a tricky thing and must be held in balance with a genuine concern for truth. All too often, but *not* in Taylor's case, it is really a call for indifference, a baptizing of 'anything goes,' and frequently enough a plea to tolerate everything *but* orthodox Christian faith. We can label this 'false tolerance.' The opposite of that is 'intolerance,' a lack of any degree of understanding of another's opinion, the absence of humility and self-criticism, a baptizing of all of one's own ideas and a vilification of those of others. It is, to paraphrase Taylor, where all of one's own opinions are made dogma. My truth us *the* truth. In times of controversy, and all times seem to be times of controversy, some more heated than others, it is critically important that we be fair and balanced in our assessment of the positions of others, and that we be accurate in our use of certain terms that are often thrown like brickbats at the opponent without careful consideration of their meaning. And so today, following up on the conciliatory spirit and the concern for unity we have seen over the last weeks in three Anglican Divines, Pusey, Andrewes and Taylor, I am going to repeat, with slight revising, a sermon I preached five years ago, which, I think, continues to be relevant.

I suppose one might suppose, on reading today's sermon title, that I was about to launch into an extended diatribe about the evils and shortcomings of various churches or denominations in our day. To be sure, there seems to be no shortage of concerns that might be grounds for such a tirade, but that is not my style nor is it the manner in which I seek to deal with matters of such deep theological and ecclesiastical significance. Furthermore my concern in today's sermon is not so much external as internal, not so much with those who seem to have no qualms about placing themselves outside the historic faith and practice of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church as with those who count themselves among its faithful devotees. In other words, my concern today is not in the first place about "them" but about "us." In particular, I am concerned

about the approach and tone of some of our polemics, the self-righteous attitude that sometimes prevails, the absolutist black and white terms in which every thing is often viewed, the sweeping and over-reaching statements that are sometimes put forth, and, most specifically in this morning's sermon, the lack of precision and clear definition in which such high caliber terms as 'apostasy,' 'heresy' and 'schism' are occasionally employed. For this reason I thought it to be worthwhile to look briefly at these three terms, both in order that we may rightly understand and interpret them and that we may recognize their value, not only in delineating the error that we may see around us and must carefully avoid, but in pointing us to the positive, salutary truth by which we should seek to live.

I.

The first term, apostasy, may be the easiest to define. Coming from a Greek word that described a runaway slave, it means a leaving, a falling away, a deliberate departure, from the faith. It has to do not primarily with doubt, though that is often involved, but with allegiance. It describes not Peter, who momentarily wavered in his commitment, but Judas, who threw it away. In other spheres of life we use terms like 'turncoat' and 'renegade.'

Apostasy is a danger that is always there for each of us. St. Paul had in view the danger of succumbing to temptation to sin when he said, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall," but he could have been speaking as well about falling from the faith. The Epistle to the Hebrews contains this grave warning, "It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted of the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, *if they shall fall away*, to renew them again unto repentance, seeing that they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame" (Heb. 6:4-6). In the Parable of the Sower Jesus spoke of those in whom the seed of God's word would take root initially, but who later on would let various worldly concerns choke it out so that it died.

It should be obvious from such words of Holy Scripture as we have cited that apostasy is an exceedingly grievous sin. In the early Church even the temporary abandonment of Christianity in the face of persecution was one of three sins, the other two being murder and fornication, that were at first accounted unpardonable, but which in time were allowed to be pardoned after public penance.

‘Apostasy’ is defined by the 1983 Canons of the Roman Catholic Church as “the total renunciation of the Christian faith” (Can. 751). The term is usually used with respect to individuals, most famously perhaps the fourth century Roman Emperor whom history would ever know as Julian the Apostate. Given the definition of apostasy as a total renunciation of the Christian faith, one should hesitate to use the term to describe churches where the wheat and the tares continue to intermingle.

II.

As ‘apostasy’ has primarily to do with allegiance or faithfulness, ‘heresy’ has primarily to do with dogma or the faith itself. J.W.C. Wand, the late Bishop of London, began his book, *The Four Great Heresies*, by stating simply, “Heresy is bad theology.” It is an erroneous and misleading failure to hear, accept and follow that essential Christian truth which was revealed by our Lord, taught by the apostles, into which the fathers and doctors of the ancient Church were lead by the Holy Spirit, and defined by the seven ecumenical councils of the undivided Church. Bishop Wand described it as “failure to think with the mind of the Church.”

St. Ignatius of Antioch used the word in precisely that sense when he wrote to the Ephesians that it had been reported to him that “you all live in accordance with the truth and that no heresy has found a home among you. Indeed, you do not so much as listen to anyone unless he speaks truthfully about Jesus Christ” (*Eph.* 6). Heresy, therefore, is that which speaks *untruthfully* about Jesus Christ, or as the broader context of Ignatius’ statement makes clear, it is to speak otherwise than the Bishops who represent Christ to his Church. That’s why we attach such great importance to the ecumenical councils, those ancient gatherings of bishops from throughout the world.

To seek truth elsewhere than in the faith once delivered to the saints is to find not truth but error, or as Ignatius would put it, to find not food but poison. In his Letter to the Trallians, he warned against heresy using precisely that analogy.

I urge you, therefore—yet not I, but the love of Jesus Christ—partake only of Christian food [i.e., truth], and keep away from every strange plant, which is heresy. These people, while pretending to be trustworthy, mix Jesus Christ with poison—like those who administer a deadly drug with honeyed wine, which the unsuspecting victim accepts without fear, and so with fatal pleasure drinks down death. (*Trall.* 6)

We should learn from Ignatius, if we have not already discovered it on our own, that heresy is seldom peddled pure and undiluted. The tempter is ever subtle, like the wicked witch in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and hides the poison in what looks like a healthy apple. There is a thin guise of Christian truth even in such a heavy dose of error as recent popular book, *The De Vinci Code*.

The Church has generally noted that there are three marks of heresy. First, it is novel. It is often a bold new idea, something no one else has thought of hitherto, a recent discovery. If the roots of a teaching cannot be found in Holy Scripture and the apostolic tradition, we should beware. Second, heresy is partial, that is it is found in one geographical area or region and not throughout the world. Christian truth, by contrast, is catholic, literally ‘of the whole,’ universal. It is noteworthy in this regard that the word heresy comes from the Greek word meaning ‘to choose.’ It is distinct, separate. The heretic will have it his way. Third, heresy is characterized by an element of stubbornness and disobedience, and hence is a manifestation of pride. Heresy is defined in the Canons of the Roman Catholic Church as “the obstinate denial or doubt, after baptism, of a truth which must be believed by divine and catholic faith” (Can. 751). And heresy, as we read in St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (5:20), is among those things that will prevent one from inheriting the kingdom of God.

III.

Lastly, we come to schism, which is “a cleavage in the ecclesiastical organization, a breach in the unity of the Church” (Wand). Schism comes from the Greek word ‘tear,’ the word Jesus used to describe the damage done to the old wineskin when patched with the new. Schism is a very different thing from heresy for it is a sin not against truth, but against love. Schismatics may be as orthodox as the day is long. St. Augustine said, “What is the difference between schismatics and heretics? It is not a different faith but the broken fellowship of communion which makes schismatics,”¹ or again, “Heretics do violence to the faith by holding false opinions about God; and schismatics, although they believe as we believe, have broken away from brotherly love by wicked separations”²

That doesn’t mean that their error is less grave. St. Athanasius wrote, “At this time the altogether wicked heretics and ignorant schismatics are in the same case; in the one they slay the

¹ S. L. Greenslade, *Schism in the Early Church*, p. 18.

² *Faith and the Creed*, X.21 (LCC VI, p. 366).

Word [that's with a capital 'W'], the other in that they rend the coat" (*Festal Letter VI.6*). St. Irenaeus in his book *Against Heresies* had this to say about schism:

[The spiritual man] shall also judge those who give rise to schisms, who are destitute of the love of God, and look to their own special advantage rather than to the unity of the church; and who for trifling reasons, or any kind of reason, which occurs to them, cut in pieces and divide the great and glorious body of Christ, and so far as in them lies, [positively] destroy it,--men who prate of peace while they give rise to war, and do in truth strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel (*Adv. Haer. IV.xxxiii.7*).

One certainly gets a feel for how ugly and painful schism is when one observes St. Cyprian writing in a letter to early schismatics:

For it weighs me down and saddens me, and the intolerable grief of a smitten, almost prostrate, spirit seizes me, when I find that you there, contrary to the ecclesiastical order, contrary to the evangelical law, contrary to the unity of the Catholic institution, had consented that another bishop should be made. That is what is neither right nor allowable to be done; that another church should be set up; that Christ's members should be torn asunder; that the one mind and body of the Lord's flock should be lacerated by a divided emulation. (*Epis. XLIII*)

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Apostasy, heresy and schism are not pleasant subjects to consider of a Sunday morning or any other time, but we need to realize that they are not only grim but grave. I said early on that I wished us to consider these things today both in order that we may rightly understand and interpret them and that we may recognize their value, not only in delineating the error that we may see around us and must carefully avoid, but in pointing us to the positive, salutary truth by which we should seek to live. Apostasy, heresy and schism are heinous sins and terrible diseases to which the Church is subject, but they are that precisely because their flip side, if you will, is that which is essential to our lives as Christians. *Apostasy* is a failure of faithfulness, and a reminder that we must never fail to keep our hands on the plow, our eyes on the Lord, and persevere to the end. *Heresy* is a failure of truthfulness, a refusal to recognize the fullness of truth revealed in Jesus Christ and taught by him to his Church, and the choosing of a substitute, the embracing of error, in its stead. And *schism* is a failure of love, a refusal to discern the body of Christ, and the setting up of our own like-minded party in its stead.

Looked at in a slightly different way, we might say that *schism*, as divisiveness, is the opposite of *love*, that *heresy*, as the inventing of one's own truth rather than receiving that taught by the Church, is the opposite of *faith*, and that *apostasy*, as a giving up on and a turning away

from Christ and his Church, is the opposite of *hope*. Faith, hope and love are the eternal things that must lie at the very center of our lives as Christians, which is why we must ever fear and seek to discern that which would turn us away from them.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, October 9, 2011 (Preached originally on September 17, 2006). Copyright © 2011.